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George B. Rodney

SYNOPSIS.

Automobile of Miss Dorothy Upton and Mrs. Fane, leaving for the city, are stopped by a band of desperadoes. The women are on way to mine of Miss Upton's father, located a few miles across the Mexican border. Kynaston, however, remains at his camp while he goes with a detail to investigate reports of the disappearance of the Upton girls. Kynaston, Dorothy and Mrs. Fane still at camp when Kynaston returns with prisoners. A blind Mexican priest appears in camp.

An aged and blind priest tells Kynaston and his guests an amazing story of wonderful jewels and a locked shrine and of a long and heart-breaking quest for one rare treasure. You'll wonder, as you read, whether or not the old padre is wandering in both mind and body—or truly his tale is strange.

CHAPTER I—Continued.

While they were eating the appetizing meal that the trumpeter spread for them upon the camp table beneath the solitary live oak that stood before the tent, they watched the sergeant help the stranger down the steps, taking the blind man to the fire, he seated him upon a saddle that lay near the cooking tent, and came forward with a salute.

"He's a priest, sir—a padre; and from what little I can make out of his lingo he's had a pretty bad time of it, sir. Shall I bring him up?"

"Yes," Kynaston sprang up. "Mrs. Fane, do you and Miss Upton object to my taking the old fellow to take his breakfast here with us? I hardly like to send him down among the prisoners to eat. He seems a cut above them, don't you know?"

"Why, of course not, Mr. Kynaston. Please do exactly as you would if we were not here. I am sure he will be very interesting."

So Kynaston went down to the fire, where the old man was explaining in broken English and Mexican patois to the prisoners, for them to translate to the Americans, that he was most tired and hungry, but that most of all he desired to hold converse with the commanding officer. Having introduced himself, Kynaston asked the old man to come to his tent and join him in coffee.

They found the two ladies already at their meal. Kynaston seated the old man between the two and poured him a cupful of steaming coffee that woke him into speech.

"Never before, when I have crossed the line, a Mexican man, as all my people were for twelve generations that stretch their hands back even unto the days before there were Spaniards in this country."

"For the space of twelve men's lives have we lived under the shadow of El Tio, seeing always the surf break on the outlying bars. Two years ago I came north, even as Coronado came, part of the way on my feet, part on mules, always with pain, for to the blind, senior, all paths are hard. And at last my dream vanished."

"My dream?"

"Aye, senior, my dream, for know that I came not without an aim. That aim has been to follow and recover what these thieves of the world have taken."

He pointed his thumb over his shoulder toward the fire, where the prisoners still sat over the bacon and bread that were being cooked for them by the cooks of the troop.

"And art thou really blind?"

"So that, senior, for fifty years I have not seen the light of day."

Mrs. Fane and Dorothy murmured their sympathy.

"So I have come, senior. For now three hundred years, and my fathers before me kept the shrine where it has been deposited since the days when Cortez came back from the courts of the old world to hold his court at Cuernavaca, and finding there in power the evil magic of the Spaniards, my enemy, retired to live upon his estates."

"Ye know, senior and ladies, how it was that the conquistador poisoned his first wife so that he could marry a second wife who should advance his fortunes. It was to this second wife that he gave those wonderful jewels, as all the world knows, the wonderful emeralds that Queen Isabella asked for in vain and that made Cortez the most courted man at Madrid. Hast thou heard of them?"

Mrs. Fane and Dorothy looked interested. All people are interested in the more mention of jewels or precious stones—even those who do not possess them.

"I have heard," said Kynaston slowly, "the same tale all men know, the tale which Gomara wrote to the effect that Cortez received as a part of the ransom of the Emperor Montezuma five great emeralds, and that when payment was made to the Spaniard king of the royal fifth part of the treasure the stones were kept by the conqueror as a part of his own share."

"Dost thou know then, or does any man know, what afterward became of the stones?"

The old man leaned forward in his eagerness, turning toward the sound of Kynaston's voice. His interest was obvious.

Dorothy and Mrs. Fane took no pains to hide their interest now.

"It was said, of course—what thou knowest—that the emeralds were taken home by him to Spain, and that when he married a second time he gave them to his wife. The queen had hinted that she herself was not unwilling to receive as a gift these most wonderful stones."

"They were, senior, as Gomara says, like this: One in the shape of a great rose, the second a fish with eyes of gold, the third an emerald cup, and the fourth a man's head with ruby eyes set in the green surface. With none of these, senior, are we concerned."

"The fifth and the most beautiful of all was a great bell, as they say, that stood, perhaps—so they

tell me, at least, for how can a blind man see?—the height of a man's thumb; carved, mark thee, from the solid emerald—the tongue is made of a pear-shaped pearl, and about the base, carved and set most probably by some skilled workman of Seville, these words, let into the jewel in letters of gold:

"Blessed is he who created thee." "But, padre, we all know—the world knows—that when Cortez went with his king—Charles—to fight the Moors he took the stones with him, and when he was wrecked at sea off the Azores coast the stones were lost—"

"The old priest sat back clicking his tongue softly.

"Then, senior, if this be true, I and my family for ten generations have been made fools of, for during ten men's lives some member of my family has always kept the shrine of Our Lady of Olvidados down in Yucatan, where the old faith still holds, and where men have not gone after strange gods."

"But how in the world if you live in Yucatan did you ever work your way so far north?"

"When General Zapata rose in rebellion after President Diaz had fled to France, the whole country rose with him. Every place was looted, and what few treasures we had were taken."

"We in Tlacotal managed to hide the wealth of the shrine, and for months my brother, who had the care

of the shrine itself, had little trouble in securing the wealth that we had hidden for high four hundred years."

"We had the stone—no, senior, not the five; only one—the greatest and most valuable. So rich it was—that I am told men's hearts turned to water at the mere sight of it. I know right well that I would have given much to see it for only one little moment; but it was not to be."

"Why, senior, by night—as beasts of prey always come—and they looted the temple and burned it after they had looted. I was not there at the time, but when I returned I found my brother dying of a gunshot wound in his mother's arms. It is best not to go into particulars, senior."

"They had no fear of God. It is lacking among them, they say, in a mob that knows neither law nor leader. And the stone was gone—looted—taken, as everything else was taken, with the raiders when they fled to the north."

"Always, senior, our raiders have come from the north, from the days of old when the Toltecs came down upon the land, and when following them the countless thousands of the red savages drove the Toltecs in headlong flight, bringing death and desolation upon the land. And then the Spaniard came, and—thou knowest the rest, senior."

"I do not speak the empty vapors of age. I am seventy-six years of age, and I have tracked that stone northward—northward ever since that when Zapata's men robbed the shrine."

"Those men who fled yesterday across the line, and who found refuge with thee have the stone. They took it in fair fight from the rebels, who were moving toward El Paso with it in the hope of selling it for gold with which to purchase arms and ammunition for their cause."

"And they in turn have lost the stone to thee; for a passing cowboy told me that these men had surrendered to the Americans and guided

me the greater part of the way to thy camp."

"I am no rebel, senior. I am a churchman, not a soldier. But I seek the stone—I, now that my brother is dead; I, the blind Priest of Tlacotal, am the lawful guardian of the shrine."

Just then the deep voice of the sergeant broke in.

"Sir, if the lieutenant is ready I'll bring up the packs and the lieutenant can go through 'em."

Kynaston, called back to earth, looked up and nodded.

"Bring 'em all up in front of my tent, sergeant."

The three pack mules, tired and ungrounded, were led up and their packs decanted in front of the tent where Dorothy and Mrs. Fane sat in interested observation.

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Miss Upton, started, looked curiously at the package under her hand which she had been resting upon the pack. She gave it a twitch, and a bundle wrapped in a rough, red blanket rolled out on the ground. Kynaston promptly picked it up.

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Kynaston took the gun. As far as its appearance was concerned it resembled every other military rifle that he had ever seen, but when he turned the under side to the light he saw stamped in the dark woodwork of the place the full-blown chrysanthemum that was the emblem of only one nation.

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"There ought to be guns an' revolvers an' ammunition," commented Kynaston. "Button! Button! Who's got the button? I wonder what they've got packed away in those aparejos."

He soon found out, for under the quiet orders of the sergeant the guards slipped the packs and opened them in front of the wondering eyes of the little group.

"I thought at least we would find that the arms manufacturers of the country had shipped rifles and pistols to them across the border," commented Kynaston. "And I find nothing—absolutely nothing. A potato—sleeping mat—and a lot of dried red peppers, together with a package of beans—fríjoles—Wait a bit! What's that under your hand, Miss Upton?"

Miss Upton, started, looked curiously at the package under her hand which she had been resting upon the pack. She gave it a twitch, and a bundle wrapped in a rough, red blanket rolled out on the ground. Kynaston promptly picked it up.

"H'm! Three rifles that have no business here and a hundred rounds of ammunition. Wait a bit! Sergeant, look at the arsenal mark on those rifles and see where they were made."

The sergeant scrutinized them carefully in the early light.

"Sir, there's some mark on 'em that I can't make out. It looks like some sort of a flower as well as I can see."

Kynaston took the gun. As far as its appearance was concerned it resembled every other military rifle that he had ever seen, but when he turned the under side to the light he saw stamped in the dark woodwork of the place the full-blown chrysanthemum that was the emblem of only one nation.

"H'm! An Alaskan rifle! Now how the deuce did that come here? It was made as far east as one can get without tumbling over to the westward again. How the deuce did a Japanese rifle come into Mexican hands?"

He had no opportunity to solve the problem, for even as he spoke Dorothy gave an exclamation and stepped back a pace as the covering of a package broke and a flood of silver pesos ran out at her feet.

"There's no proof of stealing in these," commented Kynaston. "Even if there were the stealing was done in Mexico, and the thief was not within our jurisdiction. What is this?"

It was a plain, dirty canvas sack perhaps a foot in depth and it bore the marks of rough handling. He picked it up and juggled it from hand to hand. The officer of the Carranza forces was obviously uneasy at the scrutiny.

"That, senior," he said, "is the greatest prize of all. It was stolen by these rebels across the line and was to be used by them to purchase arms."

Without waiting for any explanation as to what the contents of the sack might be, Kynaston cut the string and poured the contents out upon the saddle blanket which the sergeant had spread upon the ground. Certainly there was nothing in the roll of rags that rolled out to suggest great value. But on turning over the mass with his foot a glow of green caught his eye. There tumbled out at his feet a great crystal ball the color of the richest blue grass that grows in Kentucky!

Dorothy picked it up.

"The pesos were right," she said. "It is indeed emerald it is worth a king's ransom. What will you do with it?"

And this wonderful emerald ball plays a big part—if you were writing this story, what part would you have the jewel play in the tangled web of war plotting? Its history might be one of bloody intrigue and its future may make it a pawn for a man's life.

me the greater part of the way to thy camp."

"I am no rebel, senior. I am a churchman, not a soldier. But I seek the stone—I, now that my brother is dead; I, the blind Priest of Tlacotal, am the lawful guardian of the shrine."

Just then the deep voice of the sergeant broke in.

"Sir, if the lieutenant is ready I'll bring up the packs and the lieutenant can go through 'em."

Kynaston, called back to earth, looked up and nodded.

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